

## Sūrah Fīl

### Central Theme, Relationship with Preceding and Succeeding *Sūrahs* and Sequence of the Discourse:

From *Sūrahs* Qāri‘ah (no. 101) to Humaza (no. 104), it is pointed to the Quraysh that they have remained so possessed with the love of wealth and children that they have grossly failed to fulfil the rights of Allah as well as their own fellow beings. In spite of this, they still claim to be the heirs of Abraham (sws) and Ishmael (sws) and the custodians of the Baytullāh built by them. In this particular *sūrah* and its dual counterpart, *Sūrah* Quraysh, which succeeds it, they are cautioned that they have been blessed with peace and sustenance not because of their own efforts or because they were entitled to them, but because of the Prophet Abraham’s invocation and the blessings of the House which he built. Therefore, instead of showing vanity, it is their obligation to worship the Lord of this House, who fed them in hunger and secured them against every kind of danger, as is indicated in *Sūrah* Quraysh: فَلْيَعْبُدُوا رَبَّ هَذَا الْبَيْتِ الَّذِي أَطْعَمَهُمْ مِنْ جُوعٍ وَآمَنَهُمْ مِنْ خَوْفٍ (١٠٦: ٣-٤) (Hence, they should worship the Lord of the House, who fed them in hunger and provided them with peace in fear, (106:3-4)).

The only difference between the two *sūrahs* is that in *Sūrah* Fīl an event bears witness to the Power and Might of Allah which saved the Baytullāh from a great enemy, while in *Sūrah* Quraysh, the Quraysh are reminded of the fact that it is their association with the Baytullāh which accounts for the favours of peace and sustenance.

At the time when Abraham (sws) had settled his son Ishmael (sws) in Makkah, the land was not only scarce in food resources but was in a constant state of strife as well. Abraham (sws) had earnestly prayed to the Almighty to bless the land with peace and sustenance and the Almighty had granted him his wish. The progeny of Abraham benefited from both these favours because of Baytullāh only, but later on pride and vanity made them indifferent to these blessings. They are warned against their ingratitude at many instances (as in this *sūrah*) in the *Qur’ān*. In the *sūrahs* of this last group, *Sūrah* Balad also discusses some important aspects of this attitude and can be consulted for details.

In this *sūrah*, the Quraysh are reminded of a significant event of their history. The Almighty had helped them decidedly in combating the

forces of Abrahah who attacked the Baytullāh with a sixty thousand strong army to demolish it. It was not easy for the Quraysh to face such a big army in the open whose vane guard consisted of elephants. They had therefore sought refuge in the nearby mountains, and had defended the holy land by hurling stones at the advancing enemy. This defence was indeed very frail and feeble, but the Almighty transformed it into a powerful outburst which totally destroyed the enemy, and their dead bodies were feasted upon by kites, vultures and crows.

### Text and Translation

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

أَلَمْ تَرَ كَيْفَ فَعَلَ رَبُّكَ بِأَصْحَابِ الْفِيلِ (١) أَلَمْ يَجْعَلْ كَيْدَهُمْ فِي تَضْلِيلٍ (٢) وَأَرْسَلَ عَلَيْهِمْ طَيْرًا أَبَابِيلَ (٣) تَرْمِيهِمْ بِحِجَارَةٍ مِّن سِجِّيلٍ (٤) فَجَعَلَهُمْ كَعَصْفٍ مَّأْكُولٍ (٥)

In the name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Ever Merciful.

Have you not seen how your Lord dealt with the people of the elephant? Did He not foil their treacherous plan? And sent down against them swarms of birds? (1-3)

You pelted them with clay stones. And God made them like straw eaten away. (4-5)

### Explanation

أَلَمْ تَرَ كَيْفَ فَعَلَ رَبُّكَ بِأَصْحَابِ الْفِيلِ (١)<sup>1</sup>

The addressed words *أَلَمْ تَرَ* (Have you not seen?) are grammatically singular in nature but they are mostly used in the Qur'ān to address plural entities, as if directed to every person individually in a group of people. Here the addressees are the Quraysh. They are reminded about their recent past and asked whether they had forgotten how their Lord had dealt with the People of the Elephant. It should be kept in mind that the event which is being referred to had taken place the same year the Prophet (sws) was born. Therefore, there must have been people at the time of revelation of this *sūrah* who had witnessed it or had at least heard so much about it by so many people that it had become for them no less than a directly observed reality. The words *أَلَمْ تَرَ*, therefore, seem very appropriate.

The Qur'ān has not mentioned any details regarding the People of the Elephant, such as their description, their origin and the purpose of their

---

1. Have you not seen how your Lord dealt with the People of the Elephant?

march. The reason for this brevity is that the addressed people knew these details very well. Only their introduction by the words أَصْحَابُ الْفِيلِ (People of the Elephant) was enough to indicate that Abrahah, the Abyssinian ruler of Yemen, whose troops also consisted of elephants was being referred to. It was the first time that the Arabs had encountered elephants in a war and to express the grimness of the event they remembered it by this name.

Whether there was only a single elephant or several, is a question in relation to which both meanings can be construed from the words of the Qur'ān. But since the word أَصْحَابُ (plural) is used and not صَاحِب, which is a singular word, it is more likely that there was more than one elephant. The Aḥādīth also reinforce the fact that there was a whole battery of elephants with the army, which tremendously increased its strength and awesomeness.

Though some historians have regarded Abrahah as a tolerant ruler, yet he does not deserve such a high opinion if his life is studied. He seems to be an opportunist, a traitor and highly prejudiced Christian. He had betrayed the ruler of Abyssinia and had actually used his army to bring Yemen under his own control. History bears witness to his traitorship: it is not possible to enlist all the details, yet it is a historical fact that after assuming control of Yemen, he not only killed its Jewish king but also ruthlessly exterminated Judaism from the land.

His prejudice for Christianity made him obsessed with the idea of converting the Arabs to Christianity. To execute his scheme, he built a grand cathedral in Ṣan'ā, the capital of Yemen. He wrote to king Negus of Abyssinia, for whom he was deputising in ruling Yemen, that he had built a unique cathedral towards which he intended to divert the Arabs to offer their pilgrimage and to demolish the Baytullāh. He then made up a story that an Arab had violated the sanctity of the cathedral by relieving himself in it, only to justify an attack on the Baytullāh. Considering the traditional bravery and courage of the Arabs it is very unlikely that something like this might have happened. Even if the episode is assumed to be true, a person's individual misdeed is not enough to justify the exaction of revenge from a whole nation and to go as far as razing down the Baytullāh. It is quite evident that only to inflame the Arabs and to gain the support of king Negus that this lie was given a lot of air. He finally launched an attack on Makkah with a sixty thousand army supported by nine or ten elephants.

أَلَمْ يَجْعَلْ كَيْدَهُمْ فِي تَضْلِيلٍ<sup>2</sup>

The Almighty aborted the scheme of Abrahah which has been termed كَيْدٌ (an intrigue) by the Qur'ān because to justify a vicious move a ridiculous allegation was invented, as is indicated before. However, there are also some other reasons for calling this scheme an intrigue. Imam Farāhī mentions them in his exegesis:<sup>3</sup>

1. He (Abrahah) had attacked the Baytullāh during the forbidden months because he believed that in these months the Arabs refrained from war and bloodshed.
2. He had tried to enter Makkah when its inhabitants and other Arabs were performing the rites of ḥajj.
3. He had specially intended to launch his offensive during the stay of Minā when the Arabs would either be busy in offering sacrifice or would be returning home totally exhausted.

To foil this evil contrivance, what the Almighty did is deduced thus by Imam Farāhī:<sup>4</sup>

1. He did not let them penetrate beyond the valley of Muḥassar.
2. The Arabs used the stones of this valley to bombard their enemy, as shall be described later.
3. He let loose a ḥāṣib ( a stone hurling wind) on the enemy, which totally destroyed them.

Many eye witnesses have reported this ḥāṣib and historians like Ibn Hishām have recorded their observations. Imam Farāhī has also discussed these testimonies in detail. I shall restrict myself to two examples only. The famous poet Abū Qays while mentioning the power and glory of the Almighty refers to this ḥāṣib in the following way:<sup>5</sup>

---

2. Did He not foil their treacherous plan.

3. Farāhī, *Majmū'ah-i tafāsīr*, 386.

4. Ibid., 387.

5. Abū al-Walīd Muḥammad ibn 'Abdullāh ibn Aḥmad al-Azraqī, *Akhbār Makkah wa mā jā'a fihā min al-āthār*, vol. 1 (Beirut: Dār al-Andulus li al-nashr, 1996), 156. This source cites the first hemistich as: فَأَرْسَلَ مِنْ فَوْقِهِمْ حَاصِبًا.  
(Translator)

فَأَرْسَلَ مِنْ رَبِّهِمْ حَاصِبَ  
يَلْفَهُمْ مِثْلَ لَفِ الْقَرَمِ

(Then the Almighty unleashed a *ḥāṣib* on them which enwrapped them like rubbish.)

Similarly Ṣayfī ibn ‘Āmir has referred to a *ḥāṣib* and a *ṣayf* (This is also similar to a *ḥāṣib*, differing only in intensity):<sup>6</sup>

فَلَمَّا أَجَازُوا بَطْنَ نَعْمَانَ رَدَّهُمْ  
جُنُودَ اللَّهِ بَيْنَ سَافٍ وَ حَاصِبٍ

(As soon as they advanced beyond Batni Nu‘mān, the forces of the Almighty alighted among the *ḥāṣib* and *ṣayf* and destroyed them)

وَأَرْسَلَ عَلَيْهِمْ طَيْرًا أَبَابِيلَ (٣)<sup>7</sup>

This is a metaphorical description of the final state of devastation and helplessness of Abrahah’s army. The Almighty totally ravaged them and not a single sole survived to gather the dead; They remained scattered in the battlefield. The Almighty sent forth on them carnivorous birds, which tore and ate their flesh and cleansed Makkah from the stink of their remains. “Sending forth birds on the enemies”, is a commonly found metaphorical depiction of the state of utter decimation of the enemy in the odes and laudatory compositions of the Arab poets. They often extol their armies by saying that when they attack the enemy, meat eating birds fly with them as if they knew that after the enemy is completely destroyed they would get a chance to satisfy their hunger. In the old Testament, the tale of Dā‘ūd (David) and Jālūt (Goliath) is narrated. It says that when the two faced each other in combat and David effectively answered all the conceited remarks of Goliath, Goliath, replied irritably: ‘I shall feed the kites and crows with your meat today’. But David by the Almighty’s help turned the tables on Goliath.

The word أَبَابِيل does not mean the swallows (the birds called أَبَابِيل). It means a pack of horses and also implies a swarm of birds. Grammarians differ whether the word is singular or plural. Some say that it is a plural

6. Abū ‘Uthmān ‘Amr ibn Bah#r al-Jāhiz, *Al-Hayawān*, vol. 7 (Beirut: Dār al-jīl, 1996), 197.

7. And sent down against them swarms of birds?

word which has no singular, and some hold that it is the plural of *إِبَالَةٌ*. In the opinion of this writer, it is used here for the birds who had gathered to feed on the slain army of Abrahah.

*وَأَرْسَلَ عَلَيْهِمُ* refers to the utter state of helplessness of the People of the Elephant that no one even remained to bury the dead: the birds feasted on the dead bodies with complete freedom.

تَرْمِيهِمْ بِحِجَارَةٍ مِّن سِجِّيلٍ (٤) فَجَعَلَهُمْ كَعَصْفٍ مَّا كُولٍ (٥)<sup>8</sup>

In the end, it is indicated how the Almighty's help had aided the believers in destroying their foes. The Quraysh are addressed and told that while they were hurling stones on the enemy, the Almighty transformed this weak defence into a strong one and it became so effective that it virtually made their enemies like straw devoured away.

Our commentators generally maintain that the Quraysh did not face the attacking enemy and their leader 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib took them away to seek refuge in the nearby mountains. They left the Baytullāh in the custody of the Almighty, believing that He who is the Lord of the House shall Himself protect it. In their consideration, the subject (*fā'il*) of the verb *تَرْمِي* is *طَيْرًا أَبَابِيلَ*, ie the birds had destroyed Abrahah's army by flinging stones on them. There is a general consensus on this view, but owing to various reasons it seems absolutely incorrect. Some of them are:

(1) There is no doubt that the Quraysh had gone off in the mountains but this does not imply at all that they had completely withdrawn themselves from its defence. They had adopted a special war strategy owing to their own weak position. Instead of facing a huge army in an open battle field, they took refuge in the mountains and tried to impede the enemy attack by adopting the tactics of guerrilla warfare. A similar strategy was adopted by the Muslims in the battle of Aḥzāb (trench) when they defended the Holy land of Madīnah by digging a trench around it.

It would have been disastrous for them to engage the enemy in open warfare, for even if they had tried their best, they could not have raised an army beyond twenty thousand, which was totally insufficient to fight a sixty thousand strong army aided with a battery of elephants. The Almighty helped them according to His principle that when a believer does his utmost in discharging his duty, he is aided by Divine Help.

(2) The claim that the Quraysh offered no resistance is not only against historical facts, but also against the sense of honour and pride of the Quraysh. All historians agree that whichever routes the army of Abrahah

---

8. You pelted them with stones of clay. And Allah made them like straw eaten away.

traversed, the respective Arab tribe did not let them through without offering some opposition. They tolerated the humiliation of defeat than letting the enemy through easily with such an evil motive. The only exception were the Banū Thaqīf, who did not display the sense of honour shown by all the other tribes. Abū Righāl a tribesman of the Banū Thaqīf revealed to the advancing army the way to Makkah. As a result, of being dishonourable, the Banū Thaqīf were completely disgraced in the eyes of the Arabs and lost their respect. Abū Righāl met an equally dreadful fate: for a number of years, the Arabs pelted stones at his grave. It should be realised that when small tribes fought so gallantly, how could have the Quraysh acted in such a dishonourable way by letting the opponents achieve their goal unchecked? If they did what is generally maintained, why was only Abū Righāl condemned for a similar crime? The Quraysh have always been famous for their sense of honour, as has been mentioned before. Even in trivial affairs they had never shown any weakness which could stain their honour; how could they disgrace and dishonour themselves in an affair upon which depended their religious as well as their political supremacy? After loosing the Baytullāh, what else did they have to live for? This view, therefore, cannot be accepted.

(3) Those who hold this view – and actually disparage the Quraysh by doing so – maintain that the *sūrah* conveys somewhat the following message: ‘The Almighty Himself is the Guardian of His House. Even if its custodians run away He Himself shall protect it. So when the Quraysh retreated to the mountains, the Almighty employed the أَبَائِيلَ to defend His House. The أَبَائِيلَ destroyed the enemy by hurling stones at them.’ If this is the lesson the *sūrah* conveys, then it is totally against the laws of the Almighty. It is against His principle that His people should sit in their houses, whilst He alone should win the battle for them. If this were true, then why were the Children of Israel punished for a similar attitude when they were left to wander for forty years in a desert. They had only said: (٢٤:٥) فَادْهَبْ أَنْتَ وَرَبُّكَ فَقَاتِلَا إِنَّا هَاهُنَا قَاعِدُونَ (go there, you [O Moses!] and your Lord, we will sit here, (5:42)).

According to the law of the Almighty which is clear from the Qur’ān, He helps only those who set out to fulfil their obligations, however small in number they may be and however limited their resources may be. Consequently, the responsibilities the Qur’ān has imposed on us Muslims in Sūrahs Baqarah, Tawbah and Hajj as regards the protection and liberation of Baytullāh are that we should first do all we can and then the Almighty will help us. It is not that He will send his help if we do not strive our utmost. The Quraysh procured the Almighty’s help because they did all they could. The Almighty reinforced their weak defence by

unleashing on the enemy a raging stone hurling wind which reduced them to nothingness. In the battle of Badr too, the Almighty lent His invisible hand of help when circumstances were no different as far as the defence of the Muslim army was concerned. The Almighty had transformed a handful of dust thrown at the enemy by the Prophet (sws) into a storm. The Almighty Himself explained the nature of this event in the Qur'ān: (١٧:٨) *وَمَا رَمَيْتَ إِذْ رَمَيْتَ وَلَكِنَّ اللَّهَ رَمَى* (and you did not hurl the stones on the enemy, but it was Allah who had hurled them, (8:17)).

(4) A look at the prayer ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib had uttered while he was invoking the Almighty’s help shows that its words are overflowing with faith in the Almighty. They are the words of a person who is very disturbed and worried over a situation, yet he is very hopeful of the Almighty’s help. There is not the slightest indication that these words were uttered by someone who had run from the battlefield. Those who have derived this meaning from the prayer can only be lauded for their “subtle” sense of appreciation. If ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib had retreated in the mountains and prayed to the Almighty, it does not mean that he had withdrawn from the defence of the Baytullāh. A little deliberation shows that some of his words have the same grace of confidence in the Almighty as the prayer the Prophet (sws) had uttered amidst the battle of Badr. ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib’s prayer is like a glorious martial song which has the scent of faith and trust in it. Consider how effectively it invokes the Almighty’s help:<sup>9</sup>

لَا هُمْ إِنَّ الْمَرْءَ يَم  
نَعُ رَحْلَهُ فَاْمُنْعَ جِلَالُكَ

لَا يَغْلِبَنَّ صُلَيْبُهُمْ  
وَمِحَالُهُمْ أَبَدًا مِحَالُكَ

إِنْ كُنْتَ تَارَكَهُمْ وَقَبْ  
لَتَنَا فَأْمُرْ مَا بَدَا لَكَ

(O Lord! A man protects his family, so protect Your people. Let

9. Al-Jāhiz, *Al-Hayawān*, vol. 7, 198-199.



not their cross and their strength overpower You. If You want to leave our Qiblah at their mercy, then do as You please.)

After such a display of honour and integrity, can someone be regarded as a deserter?

Therefore, in the consideration of this writer, the view that the Quraysh had not faced the enemy, and that the birds had destroyed the enemy by flinging stones at them is totally baseless. The subject (*fā'il*) of the verb *تَرَى*, in this writer's opinion, is the tribe of Quraysh who are addressed by the words *أَلَمْ تَرَ* at the beginning of the *sūrah*. This verb is not at all appropriate for birds. The birds can drop stones held in their beaks and claws, but this cannot be termed *ramī*. This verb can only be used when "the drop" has the power of an arm, a string or a wind behind it. Even the commentators who hold the general view have also felt its inaptness. They had to "make up" the interpretation that the birds dropped stones of the size of peas, which passed through the bodies of the elephant's bodies. By this interpretation, they were able to demonstrate the effectiveness of the process, but in reality this cannot be termed *ramī*.

The word *سَجِيل* (*sijīl*) is the Arabicized form of the Persian word *sang-i gil*. Its English equivalent in the opinion of this writer is 'pebble'. It has been indicated before that the Arabs had a weak defence. The battle could have been termed hotly contested if it was fought by swords and spears and the two armies were arrayed in a battle field, and if the enemy had elephants, the Quraysh at least had horses. This, as pointed out before, was not possible; so they opted to retreat in the mountains and impede the enemy advance by hurling stones at them. Obviously, this was a weak defence and just to show the weak nature of defence, the words *يَجَارَةٌ مِّنْ سَجِيلٍ* are used by the Qur'an.

<sup>10</sup> فَجَعَلَهُمْ كَعَصْفٍ مَّا كُوِلَ (٥)

This verse expresses how the might and power of the Almighty turned the tables on Abrahah's army. Since his people had striven to their utmost, He according to His law helped them, and made their enemy like straw eaten away. To call something by the fate it shall finally meet is a common linguistic style of Arabic: *كَعَصْفٍ مَّا كُوِلَ* being an example.

It should be noted here that act of *ramī* (throwing) has been related to the people addressed, but rendering the enemy into "straw eaten away" has been attributed to the Almighty's power. The reason is that it was not possible for the Arabs alone to destroy their enemy. The Almighty

helped them by unleashing a ravaging stone hurling wind on the enemy, after the Quraysh themselves had started flinging stones on them in the valley of Maḥassar. This *ḥāṣib*, as has been indicated before, was reported by many eye witnesses. It has also been mentioned earlier, that the Quraysh had adopted similar tactics in the battle of Aḥzāb and then too “a wind” was sent to help them.

Only one question now remains. If the actual fact is that the forces of Abrahah were destroyed by the stone hurling of the Quraysh and by the *ḥāṣib* sent by the Almighty, and not by the birds, who had only come to eat away the dead, then the verses should have had the following order: وَأَرْسَلَ عَلَيْهِمْ طَيْرًا أَبَابِيلَ فَجَعَلَهُمْ كَعَصْفٍ مَأْكُولٍ تَرْمِيهِمْ بِحِجَارَةٍ مِّن سَجِيلٍ (you pelted them with clay stones. And Allah made them like straw eaten way. And sent down against them swarms of birds.) In the opinion of this writer, the people who have raised this question are not aware of a certain rhetorical styles of Arabic. In this style, just to project the consequences – good or bad – of a certain event, they are listed before expressing all the details. To express the swiftness in the acceptance of prayers, this style has been adopted by the Qur’ān at many places. The following verses of Sūrah Nūh clearly testify to this:

قَالَ نُوحٌ رَّبِّ إِنَّهُمْ عَصَوْنِي وَاتَّبَعُوا مَن لَّمْ يَزِدْهُ مَالُهُ وَوَلَدُهُ إِلَّا خَسَارًا وَمَكَرُوا مَكْرًا كَبِيرًا وَقَالُوا لَا تَذَرُنَّ آلِهَتَكُمْ وَلَا تَذَرُنَّ وَدًّا وَلَا سُوَاعًا وَلَا يَغُوثَ وَيَعُوقَ وَنَسْرًا وَقَدْ أَضَلُّوا كَثِيرًا وَلَا تَزِدِ الظَّالِمِينَ إِلَّا ضَلَالًا مِّمَّا خَطِيئَاتِهِمْ أُغْرِقُوا فَأُدْخِلُوا نَارًا فَلَمْ يَجِدُوا لَهُمْ مِّن دُونِ اللَّهِ أَنْصَارًا وَقَالَ نُوحٌ رَبِّ لَا تَذَرْ عَلَى الْأَرْضِ مِنَ الْكَافِرِينَ دَيَّارًا إِنَّكَ إِن تَذَرَهُمْ يُضِلُّوا عِبَادَكَ وَلَا يَلِدُوا إِلَّا فَاجِرًا كَفَّارًا (٢٧:٧١)

Nūh cried: O my lord! they have disobeyed me and followed those whose wealth and children only increased their loss; they contrived big evil schemes and seduced their nation by saying: do not ever renounce your gods; forsake not Wadd nor Suwā’ neither Yagūth nor Nasr [and O my Lord!] they have misled many and You only increase the wrongdoers in their wrong doing. Hence, because of their sins they were overwhelmed by the flood and cast into the fire. And they found none besides Allah to help them. And Nūh said: O Lord! Leave not a single disbeliever in the earth. If you spare them they will mislead thy servants and beget none but wicked and ungrateful ones. (71:21-27)

If one reflects on the above verses, it becomes clear that just after the Prophet Nūh (sws) had uttered the first sentence of his prayer, the fate of his nation has been depicted while the remaining prayer has been deferred, though obviously they would have met this fate after the whole prayer. The reason for this is that only to show the speediness in the acceptance of the prayer a certain sentence has been placed earlier. Likewise, in the present *sūrah*, just to depict the dreadful fate of the foes of Abrahah, the mention of sending down birds against them is made before the mention of their destruction. Since the central theme of the *sūrah* revolves round recounting the favours of the Almighty on the Quraysh, rhetorical principles dictate that the dreadful fate of the enemies be portrayed first.

My mentor, Ḥamīd al-Dīn Farāhī, has dealt at length with the various aspects of this *sūrah*. Brevity has restricted me to omit many of his views which are very important as regards the explanation of the *sūrah*. Among other details which offer a fresh insight into the *sūrah*, he considers the *hajj* ritual of *ramī-i jamarāt* as a symbolic representation of the *ramī* “done” by the Quraysh on Abrahah’s forces. I advise the readers to go through his interpretation of the *sūrah* as well, which will also bring out the very delicate difference between his views and the ones held by his humble pupil.

---